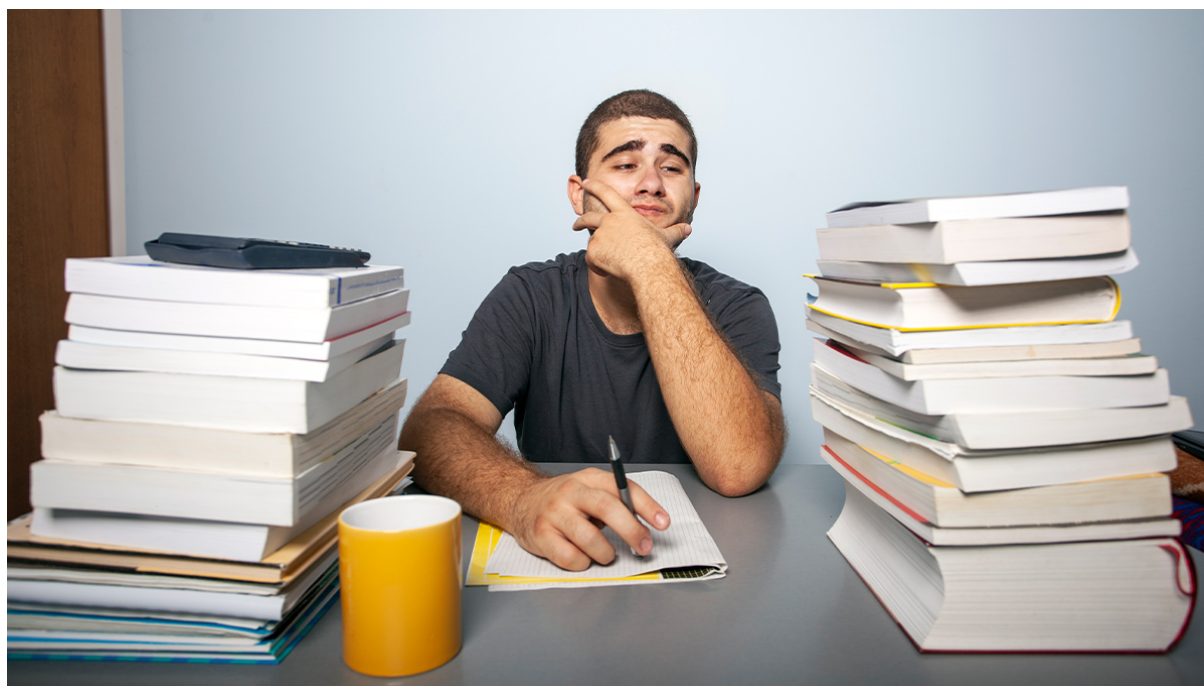


## Continuous Learning

# How to Keep Learning at Work — Even When You Feel Fried

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September 24, 2024



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**Summary.** Continuous learning is the key to having lasting influence in your career, yet a heavy workload makes it hard to find the time. To ensure you're creating opportunities even when you're feeling depleted or overwhelmed, try these five strategies: 1) Challenge your beliefs about your capacity; 2) Start with topics that solve urgent problems; 3) Don't limit yourself to formal programs; 4) Make an emotional connection to learning; and 5) Work with your brain, not against it.

**close**

Whether you want to advance in leadership or stay relevant where you are, continuous learning is critical to success. After all, if you're not evolving in this ever-changing world, you may not only get left behind the competition — you could find that your

current skills aren't even needed anymore.

At the same time, you might be trying to stay above water with no energy to devote to more training. If so, you're not alone. A 2024 study showed that more than half of workers feel "used up" at the end of the day. This means that not only are they depleted from meeting daily expectations, they have limited stamina to pursue activities that truly matter for future growth.

As an executive coach to many talented leaders who feel constantly overwhelmed, I've observed that for them, not meeting their highest potential is just as mentally burdensome as working overtime is physically taxing. But a learning journey that takes them out of their comfort zone, provides meaning based on their values, and is optimized for their style of retention is just the thing that reinvigorates them. Consider these five strategies to ensure you're continuously learning even when you're feeling depleted or overwhelmed.

### **Challenge beliefs about your learning capacity.**

I once worked with a senior executive leading a new team spread out around the world. He was exhausted from all the travel required to effectively engage them. While he was excited about this prestigious leadership role, self-doubt crept in, and a critical inner voice led him to question his leadership capabilities under these conditions. By observing this inner critic from afar, he realized he was holding onto a fixed belief that he couldn't "learn to fly the plane while it was already flying."

When you're feeling depleted, you may start to identify so much with the fatigue that you forget your agency over your thoughts and beliefs. In this condition, every exclamation of "I'm so tired," teaches your mind to believe that it's probably impossible to learn anything when you're exhausted. Instead try observing your fatigue without judgment or a desire to get rid of it and get curious about what's possible even with such constraints. Making space for the fatigue enables a more mindful response and one from which you can creatively challenge unhelpful beliefs you've been holding onto while in that state.

When the senior executive I worked with challenged his assumptions, he realized he could in fact, lead with conviction, while also learning how to keep improving. Soon his energy shifted and he was eager to make time for learning, reading articles on leading global teams and watching videos on improving executive presence for his upcoming site visits.

### **Start with topics that solve urgent problems.**

Similar to the way money grows faster by compounding interest on an existing balance, your motivation to learn will accelerate when you build on what you already know and do. Instead of laboring through subjects that don't feel urgent or pertinent to you, begin with topics that relate to existing challenges and expand on your current knowledge to gather momentum fast.

One of my coaching clients had been feeling overwhelmed at work for much of the last year. In a recent 360 assessment, he found that others perceived him as "slow to make decisions." Initially resistant to the feedback, he decided to learn from it and had a notable insight: that his avoidance of being decisive led to work piling up, which was probably why he was always feeling so

overwhelmed.

Suddenly learning about how to make better decisions seemed useful, attractive, and perhaps a way out from under his heavy workload. After consuming various resources on the topic, he decided to teach his peers some of the methods he learned as a way of making it stick. Coaching them enabled him to improve his mastery of the topic and boosted his confidence in applying it. He was also able to demonstrate positive shifts in how others perceived his work style.

### **Don't limit yourself to formal programs.**

When professionals think of learning on the job, many immediately think of pursuing a graduate degree or a certificate at a renowned university as the best plan of action. While these programs promise certain valuable benefits through their academic rigor and social proof, they can also be expensive, unnecessarily exclusive, and time-consuming.

As you decide how to shape your learning journey, remember that formal programs are just one of many avenues and often may be too theoretical or tedious, making them less useful for certain on-the-job topics than methods like peer-to-peer learning, mentorship, or 360 feedback.

I once coached a newly promoted VP of human resources who had very little free time but wanted to build her financial acumen to increase her strategic value and counsel to the business. She didn't want to enroll in MBA-level courses and instead decided to ask her peer on the leadership team, the CFO, if she could learn from him. They arranged monthly one-on-one meetings during

which he would explain the key aspects of their P&L reviews, and she would present her interpretation to get his feedback.

This approach not only helped her quickly understand the nuances of the company's finances while burdened with an otherwise exhausting schedule, but it also cultivated a valuable relationship with the CFO and his team which had never existed before across their functions. Her credibility as a business-oriented HR leader soared and, in the process, she was also able to help the CFO better understand the people strategy which was largely outside of his expertise.

### **Make an emotional connection to learning.**

Another way to learn with ease is by pursuing experiences that align with your deep-seated values rather than the fleeting expectations of others. When it is intrinsically motivating, continuous learning becomes a desirable part of your life's routine, rather than another obligatory item on your to-do list. To take it a step further, develop an emotional context around the learning, and the work involved will become a source of inspiration instead of an unwelcome burden.

I worked with an executive who was always being recommended for advanced training programs, leadership conferences, and speaking opportunities as her managers viewed her as someone who could rise up the ranks, perhaps even to CEO someday. She was flattered by their sponsorship but also found these activities onerous on top of her job. She began to wonder whether she even wanted to advance.

To get clearer on what she should do, this executive first put aside

what others wanted for her and reflected on her own values, which included a love of solving big problems in her industry and an ambition to drive change, but also a desire to be more present with her family. She concluded that moving up the ladder might mean less time with her family, but also more agency over decisions and where to spend time than staying in a junior role. And on an emotional level, she felt that if she could be successful in honoring all of her values across family and work, it would show her daughter what was possible for women in business. It was from this emotional context that she reframed the learning opportunities from things others expected her to enjoy to experiences she wanted to intentionally leverage for her aspirations.

### **Work with your brain, not against it.**

Once you are emotionally invested in learning new skills, you'll often find your second wind to push through the fatigue and keep absorbing the new information. But what good is the content if your brain struggles to retain it?

Another important way to make learning effective while depleted is to design an approach that follows your brain's preferences for retention. In the late-nineteenth century, German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus described the "forgetting curve" to explain how fast people forget things they've learned. While factors like rest and relative complexity of the topic affect how well we retain information, we still tend to forget things rapidly. Within a day, you only remember half of what was presented, and after a week, only about 10% of it, making any lasting learning journey a literal fight against time for your brain.

Fortunately, through techniques like spaced repetition and

testing recall, you can improve retention for higher learning stickiness. Let's say you've come across some valuable but complex frameworks to improve business results and want to confidently present them in ways that improve buy-in from other company divisions. To avoid reading and forgetting the content, you can set aside a half hour every morning and evening to review in parts, spacing out and repeating your exposure. Then test yourself from memory on the frameworks until they become second nature to you.

To make your brain even more receptive, keep adding higher, original learning to the content you're absorbing. Research shows that the greater degree of original content, the slower the rate of forgetting. You can consider developing more context around the frameworks you memorized, such as learning the stories of companies where they were used, or interviewing colleagues about the frameworks to invite new perspectives related to them. Combining all these methods imprints incremental knowledge in your brain with a higher likelihood of retention.

In today's fast-paced world, continuous learning is the key to having lasting influence in your career, yet already feeling overwhelmed by your daily workload makes it hard to stay consistent. By using these strategies, you can develop a lifelong learning journey that not only elevates your skills but lifts you out of exhaustion by moving closer to your highest potential.



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